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United States
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Food Safety
and Inspection
Service

Food Safety
Education Staff

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USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline

Making the Connection: 1998



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Making the Connection: Activity Report of the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline for 1998

About the Meat and Poultry Hotline

The toll-free Meat and Poultry Hotline is a service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in Washington, DC. The Hotline helps consumers prevent foodborne illness, specifically by answering their questions about the safe storage, handling, and preparation of meat, poultry, and egg products. The Hotline also responds to other issues related to the mission of USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), which is to ensure that the Nation's commercial supply of meat, poultry, and egg products is safe, wholesome, and correctly labeled and packaged, as required by the Federal Meat Inspection Act, the Poultry Products Inspection Act, and the Egg Products Inspection Act.

The Meat and Poultry Hotline, in operation since 1985, has been an effective educational tool for several reasons. First, the Hotline gives consumers quick and easy access to USDA and an opportunity to ask questions or express opinions. (Callers may choose to listen to recorded messages, available 24 hours a day, or they may call during operating hours and speak with a food safety specialist.)

Because they deal one-on-one with callers, Hotline food safety specialists are able to assess the caller's knowledge of safe food handling and provide appropriate guidance. Talking consumers through a difficult or puzzling situation helps them choose the safest food-handling alternatives, thus reducing the risk of illness. Specialists also assist callers by clearing up misconceptions about food safety and food industry practices.

In an emergency situation—an outbreak of foodborne illness, a natural disaster, or a product recall—the Hotline provides vital information in a timely manner. For example, in the event of a recall, consumers can obtain detailed information that will help them identify the suspect product.

Its nationwide service area also means that the Meat and Poultry Hotline can help detect possible public health threats. Certainly the data gathered by the Hotline helps FSIS discern gaps in consumer knowledge. In essence, the Hotline callers serve as a focus group. Analysis of caller questions and concerns allows FSIS to plan effective educational campaigns.

Finally, the Hotline is able to disseminate information widely through a variety of channels. Consumers are the primary users of the Meat and Poultry Hotline, but by no means the only ones. When writers, reporters, and educators obtain help and information from FSIS and the Hotline, that information is passed on to readers or clients who may number in the millions. Hotline callers also include government officials; people in the food industry and foodservice workers; students and teachers; other USDA employees, such as those in the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service; consumer groups; and professionals in health, consumer affairs, and law.

Hotline Accomplishments, 1998

In 1998, as in past years, the Meat and Poultry Hotline answered thousands of consumer questions about all aspects of food safety. Many were basic food handling concerns, often related to the safe preparation of holiday meals. Other questions reflected concern for the overall safety of the food supply, covering such topics as meat inspection reform, *Escherichia coli* O157:H7 testing, premature browning of ground beef, transportation and storage of shell eggs, food irradiation, labeling claims, animal husbandry and farming practices, and product recalls.

In addition to its consumer calls, the Hotline handled calls from the media and other “information multipliers.” To further assist this group of constituents, the Hotline issued news feature stories, fact sheets, and video news releases. Information kits, containing several “Food Safety Focus” or “Food Safety Feature” titles, were mailed quarterly to 3,000 newspaper and magazine food and health editors, and also to some consumer affairs professionals. Publications developed by the Hotline were also posted to FSIS’ Web site (<http://www.fsis.usda.gov>) for wider distribution. Placement of features in newspapers through NAPS, North American Precip Syndicate, ensured that millions of readers had access to information about the Hotline and safe food handling practices. Finally, to encourage coverage of food safety issues, the Hotline manager met with editors of seven magazines during a New York City media tour.

The high point of the year was the appearance of the Vice President of the United States with the Secretary of Agriculture at a summer food safety media event. The Food Safety Education and Communications Staff (FSE&CS) and the Hotline had a key role in planning and carrying out the event. (See *Caller Concerns* for more information.)

The Food Safety Education and Communications Staff—including the Meat and Poultry Hotline—continued its support of the President’s National Food Safety Initiative to improve the safety of food from farm to table. In particular, the Hotline supported the Initiative’s *Fight BAC!*[™] campaign and incorporated the campaign’s four key messages into all outreach efforts. Hotline staff also worked with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to establish a national network for food safety education. In 1998, the National Food Safety Information Network unveiled a consolidated Web site, <http://www.FoodSafety.gov>. The growing site serves as a gateway to government food safety information on the Web.

Hotline staff were also involved in food regulation and policy. The biannual Conference on Food Protection was held in Boston, April 24-29, 1998. The manager of the Meat and Poultry Hotline served as a USDA consultant, one of three FSIS representatives.

In the area of education, the FSE&CS and the Hotline worked with the American Vocational Association to develop national food safety education standards for use in secondary school curricula. These standards identified key concepts that students should master to successfully complete classes in family and consumer sciences. Standards were presented to State supervisors for family and consumer sciences and to other school administrators at the state level.

Caller Concerns: Changes in 1998

Ground Beef Studies Lead to New Consumer Recommendations

Research by FSIS and the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) supported the hypothesis that the color of a cooked hamburger is not a reliable indicator that a safe internal temperature has been reached. The FSE&CS was instrumental in devising the study protocol and presenting the findings and implications for consumers at a public meeting held May 27, 1998, in Arlington, VA.

To demonstrate that a food thermometer is essential when grilling foods—including ground beef patties—Vice President Al Gore, Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman, and consumer advocate Carol Tucker Foreman led a “Safe Summer Grilling” media event on the USDA grounds. FSE&C staff worked with the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, and the White House to plan the July 2, 1998, event. The Vice President and the Secretary, accompanied by Meat and Poultry Hotline manager Bessie Berry, presented a model cookout, explaining that serious illnesses occur in the summer months due to improper food handling. They stressed the importance of using a thermometer to avoid undercooking, and emphasized the need to keep hands and utensils clean and to store perishable foods at proper temperatures. Specifically, the presenters urged consumers to make sure ground beef patties reached 160 °F.

The Hotline staff helped develop two publications released in August 1998: *Technical Information: Color of Cooked Ground Beef as It Relates to Doneness*, and *Key Facts: Thermometer Use for Cooking Ground Beef Patties*. These publications summarize the findings of the ground beef study and recommendations for consumers.

FSIS has undertaken an educational campaign to encourage the use of food thermometers generally, as well as when cooking ground beef. In 1997, FSE&CS contracted for and guided focus group research aimed at discovering barriers that limit consumers’ use of thermometers when cooking meat and poultry. During 1998, the data collected were analyzed and some recommendations implemented. Inroads appear to have been made; during 1998, nearly 300 Meat and Poultry Hotline callers asked questions about buying and using food thermometers.

Foodborne Illness Data Raises New Questions on *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter*, *E. coli* O157:H7

E. coli O157:H7 was recognized by many callers as the pathogen of concern in raw or undercooked ground beef. But callers concerned about *E. coli* illness did not limit their discussions to ground beef. The callers asked about food-handling practices they thought might place them at risk—drinking certain varieties of juice, eating unwashed produce (or failing to treat fresh fruits and vegetables with a special wash), or field dressing venison. Worries extended beyond food as a vehicle of infection; callers asked about the transmission of *E. coli* by contaminated surfaces and through swimming pools. There were general questions regarding symptoms of *E. coli* O157:H7 illness, the number of reported illnesses, other types of *E. coli*, and microbial testing. Approximately 300 *E. coli* inquiries were noted during the year. In addition, there were approximately 900 calls prompted by recalls of ground beef for *E. coli* O157:H7 contamination.

Many Hotline callers were familiar with *Salmonella*; fewer were familiar with *Campylobacter jejuni*. Both bacteria were discussed in reports on the safety of chicken that appeared in a leading consumer magazine, on television, and in newspapers. As a result, the Hotline received a number of calls about these two pathogens. Callers responding to the news stories asked whether *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* were newly emerging problems, what measures should be taken to prevent illness, and how new technologies might reduce the levels of *Salmonella* in live chickens.

Over the course of the year, there were more questions about *Salmonella* and eggs (chiefly *S. enteritidis*) than about *Salmonella* and chicken. Egg handling and safety questions were, as in years past, especially prevalent during the Easter season. Concern continued through the summer months, fueled by televised reports on the practice of rewashing and repacking shell eggs that have not passed their sell-by (expiration) dates. Historically, much of the confusion Hotline callers have expressed about food product dating has been associated with shell eggs; these media reports increased caller concern. Concern among the general public about egg packer practices prompted Secretary Glickman to announce in April 1998 a prohibition on repacking of eggs packed under USDA's voluntary grading program, pending a Departmental policy review.

Listeria monocytogenes emerged as a caller concern in December, when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that 40 illnesses caused by an unusual strain of *Listeria* had been identified in 10 states. Investigation by CDC and various State health departments revealed an association between the illnesses and consumption of cooked hot dogs during the month prior to onset. This led to a recall by one food processor on December 22 of hot dogs and other meat products. As the outbreak and the recall continued into the new year, it became apparent that *Listeria monocytogenes* would become a major caller concern in 1999.

Fewer Callers Voice BSE Worries, But Concern Persists

Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), the so-called "mad cow disease," remained a top priority of scientists and regulators, and a concern of some Hotline callers as well. On April 24, 1998, USDA announced that it had entered into a cooperative agreement with Harvard University's School of Public Health to begin an analysis and evaluation of the Department's current measures to prevent BSE. The 2-year study will review current scientific information, assess the ways that BSE could potentially enter the United States, and identify any additional measures that could be taken to protect human and animal health.

FSIS and the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) stated at that time, "Initiating this study is the latest step in a ten-year record of aggressive measures USDA has taken to prevent the entry of BSE into the United States. In coordination with other government agencies, the USDA BSE Working Group has been regularly reviewing the available science and implementing appropriate regulatory measures to prevent BSE. These measures include the 1989 ban of cattle and cattle products from countries where BSE has been reported, as well as an active inspection, testing, and education program... No cases of BSE have been diagnosed in the United States." In September 1998, a public meeting was held to discuss the plans for the BSE risk analysis.

The Hotline documented 76 BSE calls in 1998, down from 125 in 1997. Specifically, callers were concerned about animal feeding practices and the safety of foods consumed in—or imported from—other countries.

Product Recalls

The Meat and Poultry Hotline is one of a number of channels for distributing basic information about a meat or poultry product recall. In addition, Hotline specialists help callers who may be having trouble identifying suspect product; the staff takes reports of alleged illnesses involving recalled product and forwards the information to Agency public health specialists. In 1998, questions about recalled meat and poultry products accounted for 8 percent of inquiries answered by Hotline food safety specialists. This aspect of the Hotline's role expanded because 44 meat and poultry product recalls were requested by the Agency in 1998, compared with 27 in 1997 and 25 in 1996.

The Hotline staff anticipates a continued increase in recall questions. A factor contributing to the greater number of recalls (and resultant consumer calls) is PulseNet, a computer network linking Federal and State agencies that captures the molecular fingerprints of pathogens in a national database. Through PulseNet, sporadic cases occurring in multiple states can now be identified as part of an outbreak.

Callers' specific concerns about recalls included: product codes and their location on the package; what to do with recalled product; the safety of similar products and other brands; signs of illness, or reports of alleged illness; actions to be taken by foodservice establishments and other vendors; the nature of the pathogens involved; and safe handling of the type of product in question.

USDA Rulemaking: Organic Labeling; Irradiation of Red Meat

The Hotline's food safety specialists reported food irradiation as the subject of 109 inquiries in 1998. On December 2, 1997, the FDA approved the use of irradiation to control pathogens in fresh and frozen red meats such as beef, lamb, and pork. Therefore, many of the irradiation questions focused on FSIS' response to that approval and the development of FSIS' implementing regulations. However, an initiative led by another USDA agency, the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), generated several of the irradiation inquiries.

In December 1997, AMS published proposed regulations that would govern USDA's National Organic Program (NOP). The public comment period for the proposed rule opened December 16, 1997, and closed April 30, 1998. AMS received an unprecedented 275,603 comments on the rule (including signatures on petitions). While FSIS was not the lead agency, part of its mission is to ensure the correct labeling of meat and poultry products. Accordingly, some consumers used the Meat and Poultry Hotline to voice opinions or gather information on the NOP proposal. The callers who discussed irradiation in this context did not believe irradiated product should qualify for an "organic" label.

The Meat and Poultry Hotline noted 74 inquiries on all aspects of the NOP proposed rule. Approximately one-third of those inquiries were referred to and handled by AMS.

Food Storage

How long should food be kept in the refrigerator or freezer or on the shelf? Even though this is largely a question of food *quality*, Hotline callers do judge the microbiological *safety* of their food by the length of time it is stored. Food storage queries have historically been the Hotline's most frequently asked questions, often leading to discussions of other food safety issues.

Several times during the year, the media pointed to the Meat and Poultry Hotline as a resource for consumers seeking food storage information. Each time, the result was a noticeable short-term increase in call volume. Surges were triggered by "Hints from Heloise," a syndicated newspaper column; an article in *Organic Gardening* magazine; and a cable TV talk show. The "Hints from Heloise" column generated more than 700 calls to Hotline specialists, plus a large number of after-hours calls.

Apart from these events, callers asking about food storage were likely to report their source of the Hotline number as a cookbook (most often the *Better Homes and Gardens Cookbook*); Cooperative Extension; or the *Cleveland (OH) Plain Dealer* newspaper, which runs the Hotline's toll-free number on a regular basis.

Power Outages; Natural Disasters

Another very common concern of Hotline callers is the safety of refrigerated and frozen food after a power outage. These are often brief and sporadic events. Sometimes, however, outages are a consequence of a storm, flood, or other event that has a far-reaching impact on a large number of people.

In 1998, 5 percent of inquiries handled by the staff were prompted by power outages. These 1,700 inquiries spread out over the entire year, but they were most common in June and July. During those months, power outage calls came most often from the states of Minnesota, Michigan, Missouri, and Pennsylvania.

Following a natural disaster, the Hotline may receive only a small number of calls, but still play a role in relief efforts. Hurricane Georges in September 1998 is an example of this. Between September 24 and October 6, specialists on the Meat and Poultry Hotline handled 34 hurricane-related power outage calls from the Southeastern United States (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi). The Hotline augmented these efforts by providing food-handling information to the media and health officials in the affected areas, and by making information available on the Internet. The FSIS and USDA Web sites have disaster information sections and links to a number of State agencies that also provide assistance. And, by offering a variety of recorded messages on its automated system, the Hotline undoubtedly assisted hurricane victims in addition to those 34 who called during business hours. (Unfortunately, in some cases, damage to the home or business was probably so extensive that consumers had no doubt about whether the foods should be discarded.)

Holiday Food Safety

A few variations on standard holiday themes were noted in 1998. Since new labeling requirements for use of the term “fresh” had taken effect, the Hotline was interested in tracking any emerging concerns related to the labeling of turkeys. A few callers were aware of changes in “fresh” labeling policy; however, fresh questions were generally tied to practical decisions, such as when to shop for groceries for Thanksgiving dinner.

Turkey storage, and the thawing of frozen turkeys, has always been a concern of Hotline callers. But in recent years, the issue has become more confusing for them. Factors compounding their confusion include an increase in the number of turkeys bearing open dates, particularly “use by” dates. Some callers were assured by turkey processors that turkeys could be purchased any time during November. At least one grocery store chain suggested a shelf life of 4 to 7 days in the home refrigerator. However, food safety educators—including the Meat and Poultry Hotline—continue to advise that fresh or thawed turkeys may spoil if held in a 40-degree refrigerator longer than 1 to 2 days. Fear of spoilage, and natural procrastination, led some consumers to consider novel methods for quick thawing, including submersion in a backyard swimming pool.

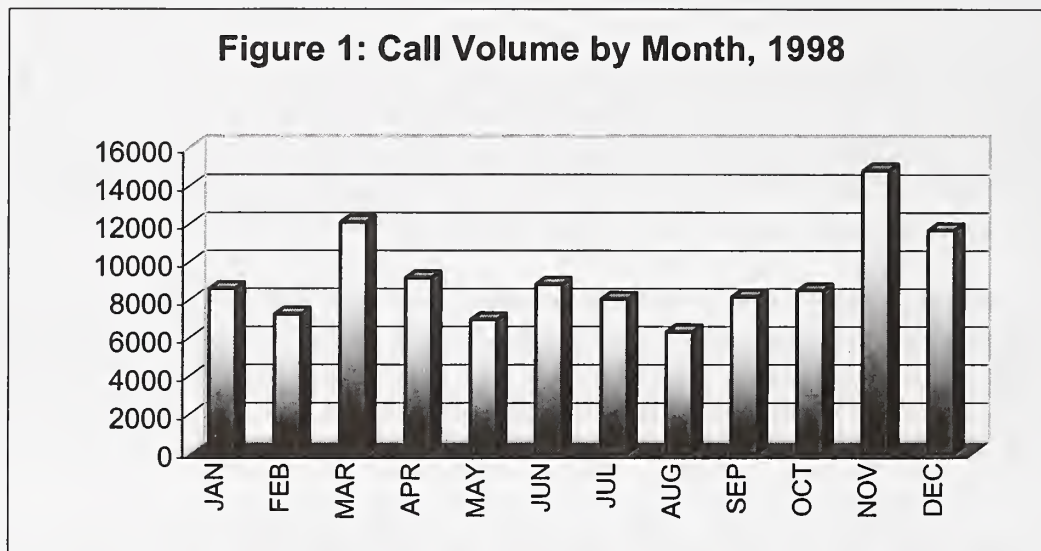
Each year, certain preparation methods achieve popularity among callers. This holiday season, a number of callers asked about brining a turkey (soaking in salt water) for up to 24 hours before cooking. This recipe had food safety implications, because most callers had no place to do this easily and were tempted to brine the turkey outside the refrigerator.

Facts and Figures

This section presents facts and figures about Meat and Poultry Hotline calls and inquiries received in 1998.

Call Volume

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the 110,573 calls received by the Hotline during the year ending December 31, 1998. As usual, November and December were busy months (13.4 percent



and 10.6 percent of calls, respectively). Food preparation is central to holiday celebrations, and callers' interest in food safety intensifies as the holidays approach. However, by a small margin, March—rather than December—was the second busiest month of the year (10.9 percent of calls). Extensive publicity of the Hotline number on television was one factor contributing to the upturn in March. In particular, a food storage segment on The Nashville Network's "Crook and Chase" generated a large number of calls.

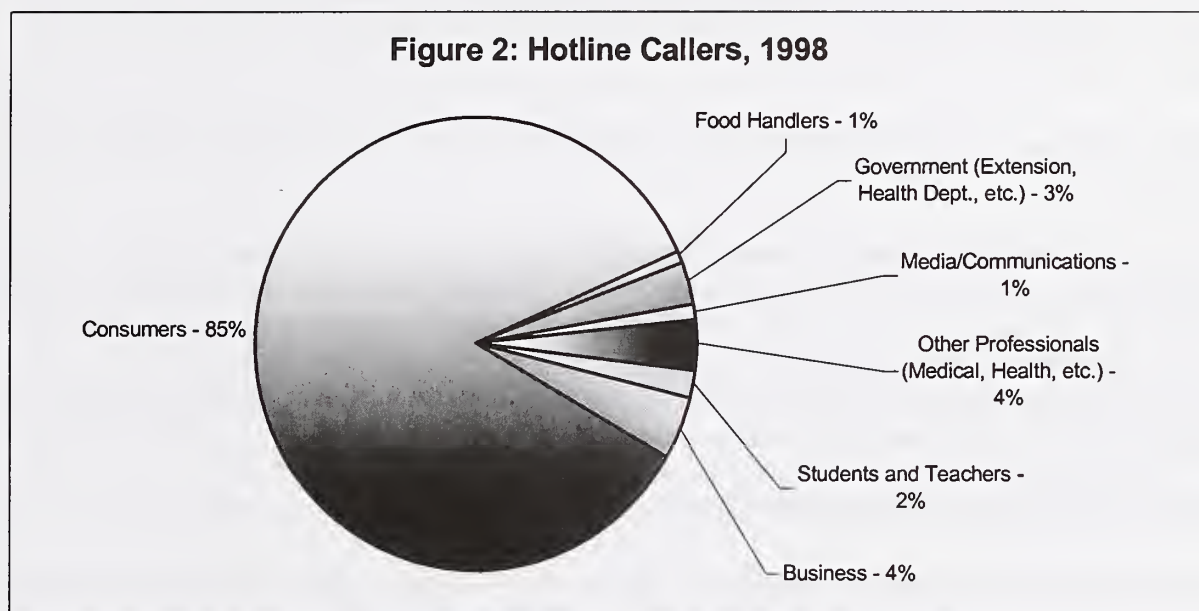
Presently, six inbound telephone lines service the Hotline's 800 number. The Hotline also provides a local number for residents of the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area, and a TTY number for the deaf/hearing impaired.

The Hotline offers assistance from food safety specialists from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday through Friday, but the system provides recorded food safety messages 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Therefore, the number of callers who spoke to a food safety specialist—and had their concerns documented—is less than the total number of incoming calls. The remaining statistics in this report are based on the records of 36,030 calls that include 37,484 inquiries. (One person's "call" may include several distinct "inquiries" on different topics.)

Hotline Callers

The Meat and Poultry Hotline is primarily a consumer service, and in 1998, 85 percent of Hotline callers were calling as interested consumers. The remaining 15 percent identified themselves as part of a specialized audience (see figure 2).

The Hotline's business and professional clients included educators and communicators; government officials; registered dietitians; home economists; Extension agents; health



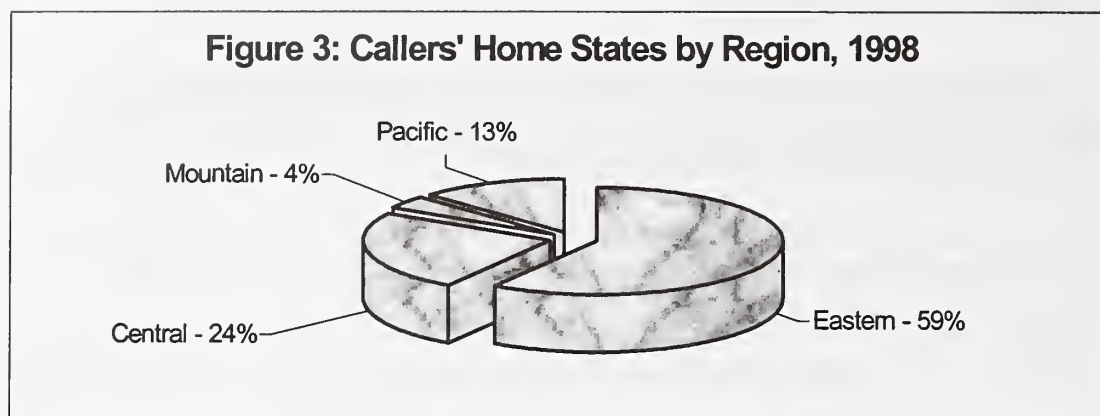
professionals; consumer affairs professionals; and representatives of FSIS' regulated entities. These "multipliers" of information—especially the media callers—allow the Hotline's recommendations to reach a vast number of consumers, not just those who call the Hotline themselves.

Figure 2 counts the 341 media/information multiplier calls that came to the Hotline and were handled by specialists. Additional media calls reached the Hotline manager through other channels, bringing the actual total to 523. These included calls from newspapers (153), magazines (149), radio stations (50), television stations (48), newsletters (23), and various other organizations (100).

Callers' Home States

As a centralized service, the Meat and Poultry Hotline is able to compare calls received from different regions of the country. In 1998, as in prior years, the Hotline received calls from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, U.S. territories, and foreign countries. The distribution of the calls from the United States is shown in figure 3; the named regions are roughly equivalent to time zones. The Eastern zone—largest in terms of population and number of states—produced 59 percent of the calls; the Central region, 24 percent; the Mountain region, 4 percent; and the

Figure 3: Callers' Home States by Region, 1998



Pacific region, 13 percent. This geographic distribution of calls is similar to the distribution in years past.

The top call-producing states, in descending order, were: New York, California, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Florida, Illinois, Texas, New Jersey, Michigan, Maryland, and Virginia. Together these states accounted for 64 percent of calls where the state or country was known (N=35,444).

There were 40 calls from countries other than the United States, including Canada, Mexico, Nigeria, Italy, Jamaica, and England.

How Callers Learned of the Hotline

Figure 4: Source of Hotline Number, 1998

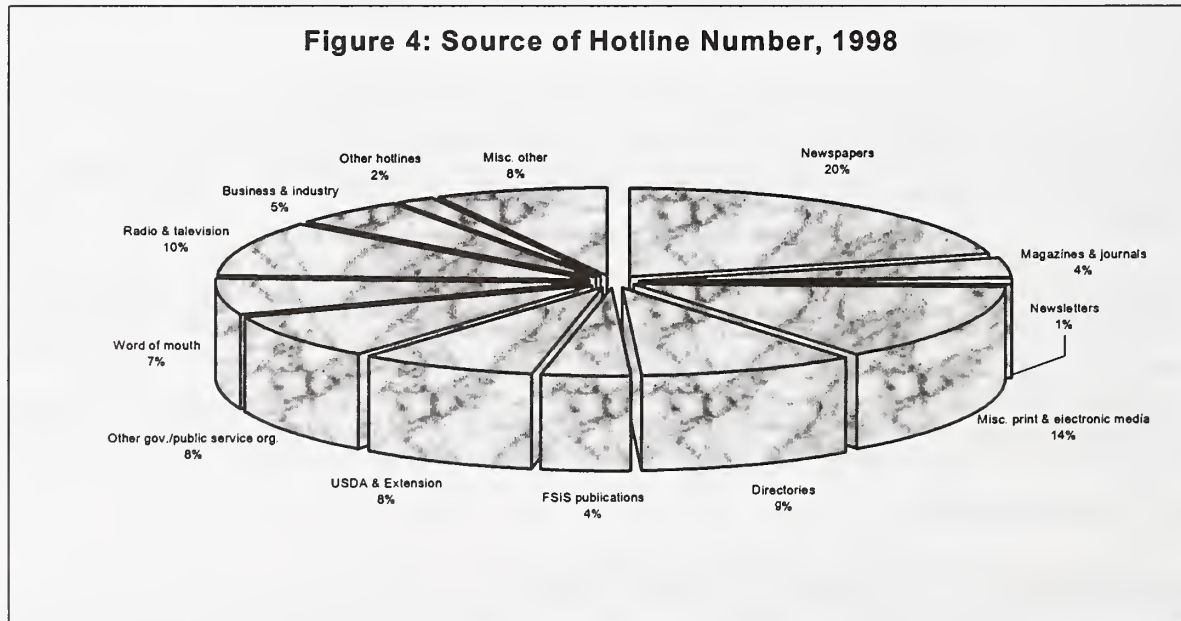


Figure 4 illustrates the ways callers learned of the Meat and Poultry Hotline. Sources of the Hotline telephone number were recorded for first-time callers (N=24,179), who placed two-thirds of all calls. (The remaining one-third of Hotline calls were from repeat callers.) Print

media were the most used sources, although an increasing variety of communications channels—including books and Web sites—led callers to the Meat and Poultry Hotline.

The sources mentioned most often were newspapers (20 percent of first-time callers); miscellaneous print and electronic media, including books, pamphlets, and the Internet (14 percent); radio and television (10 percent); and directories (9 percent). The most frequently mentioned media outlets included: major daily newspapers (*Chicago Tribune*, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *Detroit News & Free Press*, *Houston Chronicle*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, *New York Times*, and *Washington Post*); the syndicated newspaper column “Hints from Heloise;” the popular magazines *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Family Circle*; and television programs on the Cable News Network (CNN) and The Nashville Network (TNN).

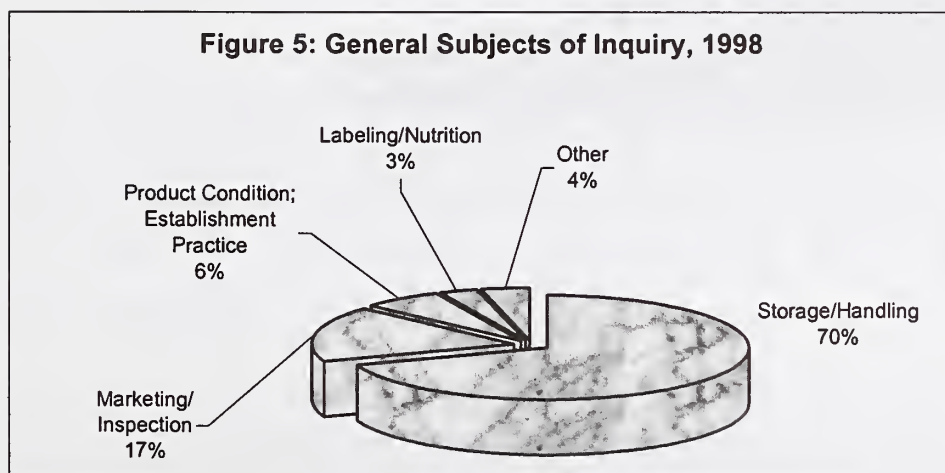
Types of Inquiries

Ninety-eight percent of the inquiries handled by the Meat and Poultry Hotline in 1998 were information requests. The remaining 2 percent were complaints.

The Hotline is one channel through which consumer complaints reach FSIS’ Office of Public Health and Science, Food Hazard Surveillance Division, where complaint investigation is managed. In 1998, 607 inquiries were classified as complaints. Of these, 219 were referred for formal Agency investigation. The remaining 388 complaints were of a more general nature, or needed to be referred to the FDA or a local health department for action.

Reports of possible foreign objects in meat or poultry products were the most common type of formal complaint, followed by reports of alleged illness or injury. Informal complaints most often concerned alleged foreign objects; product appearance; conditions at a grocery store or foodservice establishment; an alleged illness or injury; or product appearance, taste, texture, or odor.

Subject of Inquiry



As shown in figure 5, most Hotline inquiries pertain to safe food storage, handling, and preparation. This type of query, along with publication requests and general questions about foodborne illness, accounted for 69 percent of inquiries

in 1998. This is consistent with data from previous years, which show that basic food safety questions usually account for approximately 70 percent of all inquiries.

Seventeen percent of inquiries (up from 15 percent in 1997) dealt with food marketing and inspection issues. For example, callers asked about the actions of the regulatory agencies: meat, poultry, and egg product inspection; HACCP implementation; product recalls; product formulations; etc. Purchasing decisions also raised safety questions for consumers; they inquired about food packaging, cooking equipment and housewares, agricultural chemical use, food additives, quality grading, animal husbandry practices, and food biotechnology.

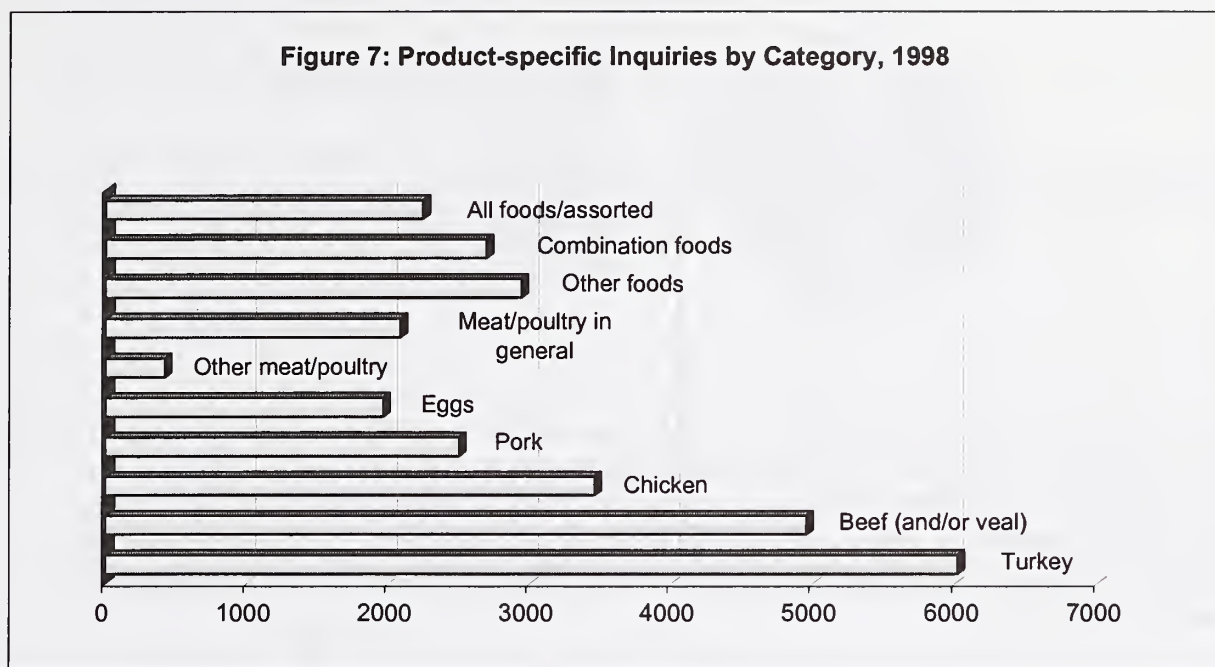
Approximately 6 percent of inquiries dealt with products and practices that failed to meet the caller's expectations. Examples are products in "off" or suspect condition, practices in grocery stores, and practices in foodservice establishments.

Three percent of inquiries pertained to labeling (ingredient, nutrition, etc.), product dating, or basic nutrition. The remaining 4 percent of inquiries reflected other concerns and included referrals for questions outside the Hotline and FSIS mission area.



The year's top 15 subjects of inquiry are shown in more specific terms in figure 6.

Inquiries by Food Product Category



Seventy-eight percent of inquiries were associated with a specific food or class of product. Figure 7 depicts this group of inquiries (N=29,315).

Sixty-five percent of the product-specific inquiries fell under one of the top five categories. These were: turkey, beef and/or veal, chicken, pork, or eggs/egg products.

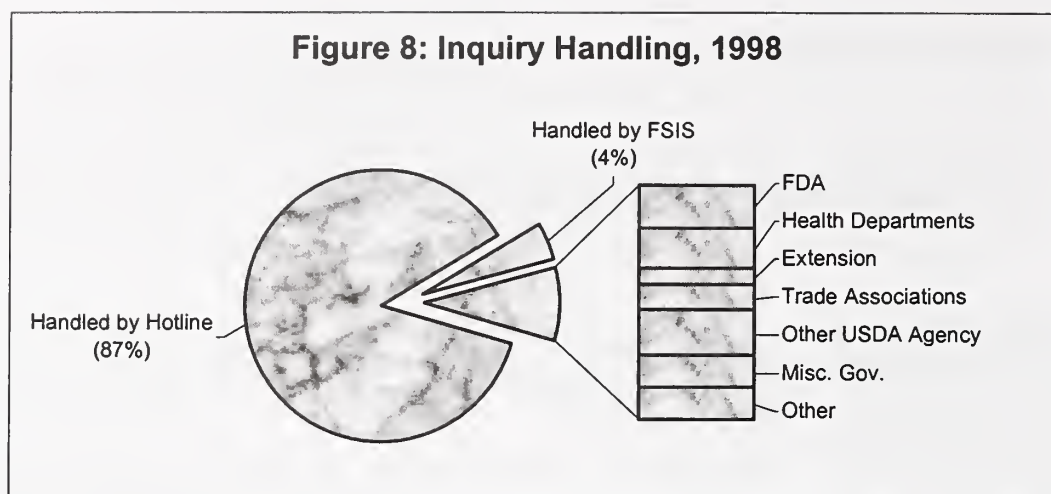
Inquiries varied seasonally. Turkey calls prevailed in November and December; pork and egg questions were more frequent in the spring; chicken and beef questions dominated the summer grilling and picnic season.

Figure 7 shows that the Meat and Poultry Hotline receives and addresses questions about products other than meat, poultry, and egg products. The principles of safe handling are the same for all foods, and generally other foods are prepared alongside meat and poultry dishes. However, questions about other products are referred to the responsible regulatory agency when necessary. Most often, the responsible agency is the FDA or a local health department. (See “Call Management,” below.)

Call Management

The Hotline’s food safety specialists maintain contact with experts in FSIS and many other agencies in order to provide the best, most current information to consumers. As a result, the Hotline staff resolved 87 percent of inquiries. Approximately 4 percent of inquiries were referred to another division of FSIS; the remaining 9 percent were referred to other agencies.

Figure 8: Inquiry Handling, 1998



Most referrals were made to one of these five agencies: FDA, which regulates foods other than meat, poultry, and egg products; other USDA agencies; State or local health departments, responsible for inspecting grocery stores and foodservice establishments; the Cooperative Extension System, a grass-roots educational program co-sponsored by USDA and each state's land grant university; or industry trade associations. Figure 8 illustrates how inquiries were handled in 1998.

Day-to-Day Operation of the Hotline

The Meat and Poultry Hotline is one part of FSIS' overall food safety education program. In support of that program, Hotline specialists assumed many responsibilities in addition to answering calls. During the year, the Hotline staff developed 13 publications based on calls to the Hotline. These included new titles in the "Food Safety Feature" and "Food Safety Focus" series and a brochure. Publications were distributed in print, electronically, and as part of quarterly mailings to newspaper food and health editors, magazine editors, and consumer affairs professionals. All these publications are available on the FSIS Web site, <http://www.fsis.usda.gov>.

Key pieces of advice were the subjects of additional print and video news releases.

Staff members served as subject matter experts on specific food safety issues. This responsibility entailed conducting literature searches, attending professional meetings and seminars, establishing alliances with experts across the country, and developing reference materials. Specialists maintained contact with other offices, agencies, and organizations that conduct food safety education. To reach audiences beyond the Hotline's callers, specialists gave speeches and presentations at conventions, professional meetings, and in a variety of other settings.

The personnel who staff the Meat and Poultry Hotline all have several years of experience on the Hotline, and they bring a variety of work and educational experiences to their work. The staff includes home economics and nutrition teachers, public health and community nutrition experts, microwave cooking and appliance specialists, journalists, and registered dietitians with nursing home and hospital experience.

For More Information

USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline may be reached by calling:

- 1-800-535-4555 (voice),
- 202-720-3333 (Washington, DC, metropolitan area), or
- 1-800-256-7072 (TTY).

Callers may speak with a food safety specialist between 10:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. Eastern Time, Monday through Friday. Recorded food safety messages are available 24 hours a day.

Meat and Poultry Hotline Staff

Marva Adams

Marva Adams, home economist, joined the Hotline staff in 1993. Previously, she taught public school and worked as a consumer advisor for a major utility company in Washington, DC. She has a bachelor of science degree in home economics education from the University of Tennessee.

Sara Beck

Sara Beck joined the Hotline staff in October 1990. In prior years, she was a consultant in the Washington, DC, area in the fields of food, marketing, and communications. She received a bachelor of science degree in home economics from Catawba College in Salisbury, NC, and a master of science degree in home economics and communications from the University of Maryland. She worked as a home economist with a North Carolina utility company, nutrition advisor to the executive chef of the Pentagon cafeterias, and a home economist/consumer specialist conducting a nationwide consumer information program for the inspection and grading services of USDA. In addition to handling Hotline calls and other responsibilities related to consumer education—i.e., researching and writing articles—Ms. Beck continues her consulting work and is also writing a cookbook.

Katherine H. Bernard

Kathy Bernard joined the Hotline staff in April 1992. Her previous work experience includes 8 years with the National Food Processors Association (NFPA), where she examined exhibits involved in consumer claims. This work included performing bacteriological examinations of food products, and evaluating food product container integrity. Ms. Bernard received a bachelor of science degree in biology from The American University in Washington, DC, and a master of science degree in food science from the University of Maryland in College Park, MD. She is a professional member of the Institute of Food Technologists.

Bessie Jones Berry

Bessie Jones Berry has been with the Meat and Poultry Hotline since 1986. She is the manager of the Hotline, supervising one public affairs specialist and nine full-time and part-time home food safety specialists who answer Hotline phones. She serves as media spokesperson for the Meat and Poultry Hotline and is featured on radio and television and quoted in newspaper and magazine articles. She has a bachelor of science degree in home economics from the University of Maryland, and a master of science degree in consumer affairs from Howard University in Washington, DC, which included an internship in the White House Office of Consumer Affairs. She taught foods and nutrition courses in public schools.

Marilyn Johnston

Marilyn Johnston has been with the Hotline since May 1987. Her background includes teaching home economics and serving as home service advisor to two major electric utilities in Indiana. She is an expert in microwave cooking, having worked for 12 years for a major microwave company. She received her bachelor of science degree from Purdue University, with a major in foods and business home economics. She is an active member of Electrical Women's Roundtable.

Sandy King

Sandy King graduated from the University of Maryland with a bachelor of science degree in home economics. She then worked at a Washington, DC, utility company as a home economist. After leaving the electric company, Ms. King taught microwave cooking for Amana, General Electric, Thermador, and Jennair. Ms. King was a manufacturer's representative for a number of cookware lines, demonstrating products at conventions, dealer shows, and stores. She was employed for 2 years by a kitchen design firm and has also coordinated conventions and programs in the Washington, DC, area. Ms. King joined the Meat and Poultry Hotline in 1993.

Robyn Sadagursky, R.D., L.D.

Robyn Sadagursky received a bachelor of arts degree from Brooklyn College and a master of arts degree in management and supervision from Central Michigan University. A registered, licensed dietitian, her experience includes consulting in a hospital and numerous long-term care facilities. In addition, she was employed as a renal dietitian and a foodservice director. She is an active member of the American Dietetic Association. Ms. Sadagursky has been with the Hotline since 1992.

Diane VanLonkhuyzen

Diane VanLonkhuyzen, home economist, has a varied background in the field that includes a position as consumer advisor to a major utility company in the Washington, DC, area. For 9 years she ran a test kitchen, developed recipes for the company's cookbook, and conducted cooking and energy conservation demonstrations in the community. Ms. VanLonkhuyzen also served as a consultant to numerous appliance manufacturers. She has been with the Hotline since September 1986, and has a bachelor of science degree in home economics from the University of Maryland. Ms. VanLonkhuyzen coordinates a variety of special projects for the Hotline.

Mary Wenberg, R.D.

Mary Wenberg received a bachelor of science degree in foods and nutrition from Ohio University. She completed a dietetic internship and earned a master of science degree from Ohio State University. A registered, licensed dietitian, her experience includes hospitals, university teaching, and school foodservice. Ms. Wenberg was professionally employed in Ohio, West Virginia, Minnesota, and Texas before moving to the Washington, DC, area. She is an active member of the American Dietetic Association and has been with the Hotline since 1989.

CiCi Williamson

Home economist CiCi Williamson brings expertise in the field of microwave cooking to the Hotline. In addition to answering consumer calls, she is a syndicated newspaper columnist, author of five cookbooks, and a book editor. Ms. Williamson has written almost 2,000 food articles that have appeared in professional journals, women's magazines and hundreds of newspapers. She has taught microwave seminars for 18 years and is a speaker at major food conferences. Ms. Williamson is past president of the National Capital Area Home Economists in Business, the International Microwave Power Institute's Consumer Appliance Section, and Les Dames d'Escoffier. She has also served as a board member of the Association of Food Journalists. Her bachelor of science degree in home economics education is from the University of Maryland. Ms. Williamson has been with the Hotline since 1988.

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